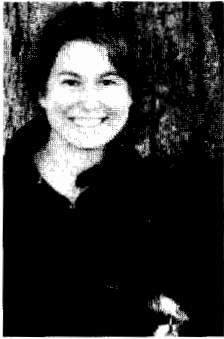


Canine Assisted Skills: One Team's Journey

Nancy Karp



Nancy Karp and
Maeve

IN THE YEAR 2000, I rather unexpectedly adopted a puppy. The changes in my life from this experience were significant. My puppy, Maeve, helped me realign my priorities and get back on track with what is important in my life. She and I found ourselves on a path to bring this connection and joy to others.

Early in 2000 I had been working as a sales representative for a major pharmaceutical company. I worked upwards of sixty hours a week, calling on people who resented me, and providing "objective" information about a drug from the company who produced that drug. (Can you say conflict of interest?) I cried pretty regularly, either from overwork, the pressure, the rejection or the lack of any moral foundation about the work I was doing. The only thing that kept me going was that fat paycheck. May we have a moment of silence for the loss of that... (sigh).

One day when a doctor, my next appointment, had not yet returned from his lunch, I stopped in at the Massachusetts SPCA next door to his office. Since I found being a sales representative highly stressful and isolating, it was no surprise that being greeted by a dozen dogs of varying shapes and sizes all with a common desire to have me spend some time with them, was appealing. What a contrast to my daily grind! With no intention of taking an animal home, I wandered through the aisles saying hello. Then I saw her. A tiny, fuzzy, black puppy, with white paws and a white blaze down her chest and a white tip on the end of her tail, sitting in a huge crate all by herself. She was making strange little movements as she sat there and I realized she had a case of the hiccups. Well... I never did make that pharmaceutical sales call to that doctor and my life changed forever.

I did for that dog what I was unable to do for myself. She reminded me what was important; love and connection, and providing the time and space for it to grow. There didn't seem to be enough hours in the day to spend time with Maeve and it wasn't long before I said goodbye to the pharmaceutical industry and took a job as a "doggie day-care" counselor. Maeve completed puppy kindergarten, Obedience classes, and level one Agility training.

I found my life changed for the better (though poorer) through my attachment to Maeve. Fifteen years prior, before I went to school for neuroscience and behavior and set off on a path in children's psychological research (and before getting bogged down in the mind numbing, soul robbing, corporate pharmaceutical industry), I had worked with children in residential care. My relationship with my dog was intense and mysterious, and it reminded me of that first "real job." Serving children with emotional and behavioral issues is definitely intense and also more than a little mysterious. As a young counselor, I had believed my most important role with the cli-

ents was to help them learn to have fun. This belief stayed with me through the years and I returned to the Northampton Center for Children and Families with hopes of rediscovering meaningful work with children.

Many of the kids I work with now have spent a lot of time stressed and worried for many reasons. The stressed and worried mind is less receptive to new learning. Anyone who has worked with dogs has seen that an animal under stress does not take in as much as one that is comfortable. This animal model translates pretty well to kids. In fact, I think a lot of animal models translate well, but more about that later.

Upon my return to Northampton Center for Children and Families I learned there was a policy restricting animals on campus. Since dogs were not allowed in the residences, there were quite a few obstacles to overcome. What exactly were the concerns which kept the center a dog free zone? Could I demonstrate benefits of the animal alliance, which might outweigh the program's liability and housekeeping anxieties? Maeve had just passed her Canine Good Citizen test and had become a registered Therapy dog with Dog B.O.N.E.S. of Massachusetts, thus giving her liability insurance. This, coupled with a note from my veterinarian that Maeve had no fleas, was enough to get her clearance to be in the center's gym.



The Agility exercises are not as important as the skills kids use to handle the "unexpected."

(Photos courtesy Nancy Karp)

One of the techniques being used to help the kids learn to handle distress and develop more adaptive skills for coping with their emotions and behaviors is Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, (referred to as DBT). DBT is based heavily in behaviorism and has many parallels to modern clicker training for dogs. I began to use Maeve to help illustrate to the kids what it is like to learn new skills and practice them, just as they are trying to do in DBT.

There are a couple of advantages to illustrating the behavioral bridges between DBT and positive training. The most important is that it is FUN! There is barking, running, squeaky toy tossing, treat giving, brushing, petting and doggie kisses. Using Maeve as a teaching model can also give kids some distance from their own difficulties. They aren't trying to change their own behaviors, they are changing Maeve's behavior. It feels good to them to develop a relationship with Maeve, and as they change Maeve's behavior they learn about the techniques they can use to change their own behavior. The fun and learning in the process can give them the motivation and hope they need to make changes for themselves.

Right now our classes are designed to have one student working with Maeve with direction from me. I will ask them to put Maeve through an obstacle: tunnel, jump, weave poles,



It can be difficult for the kids in the program to close their eyes and focus on a mindfulness exercise when Maeve runs by through the tunnel.

or chute. Alternatively, I will ask them to have Maeve perform a command like “leave it” or “stay”. Once Maeve has done her part, they need to practice one of the skills that they use to handle distress. They can choose an external skill, which like Maeve’s obstacles, require a prop: a Walkman to listen to music, game boy, or playing cards. I also encourage them to practice an internal skill like taking deep breaths or visualizing a pleasant scene, or focusing on an object and noticing when their attention wanders.

I talk to the children about the differences in Maeve’s skills. She can’t always run through the tunnel if she needs to get her mind off something but she can do the skills she’s learned like sit or stay. We look at which ones seem to work best for her. How can we tell? She doesn’t like to sit on the hard floor but seems to beam with pride when lying down and staying on her bed. Which skills would help her if she saw squirrels across a busy street? What skills can help her on a bumpy car ride? (Not many...rumbles and bumps really freak her out.) What comparisons can kids make from this to their own skills and the kinds of situations in which they find themselves? It is easier for them to talk about their own difficulties in the light of someone else’s — or a dog’s as the case might be.

I’ll share one story of a ten-year-old boy who put Maeve through the tunnel with skill and flair and then chose to “count

to ten” as his skill. This is how the session went:

He said “One” and Maeve barked.

“Two!” he said with more enthusiasm. Maeve barked. (Evidently it’s more fun when someone counts with you!)

“Three!” he said smiling and looking at me.

“Woof!”

“Four!”

“Woof!”

“Five!” (no doggie bark this time but a playful bow and a little whine — apparently her math skills end at four.)

“Six! SEVEN! EIGHT!! NINE!!! TEN!!!!”

I asked this young man when he might use the skill of counting. He answered when he was at the residence and feeling angry. I asked what other skills he could use. He responded that taking a few minutes away from the person with whom he was angry, and then talking to a staff member before responding to the situation would be helpful. I asked him if we could role play that scenario, and he agreed.

“Could I take a VTO?” he asked me. (VTO stands for: Voluntary Time Out)

“Why do you need a VTO?” I asked.

“Because a kid pushed me and he didn’t get in trouble for it.”

“So are you feeling pretty angry right now?”

“Yeah!”

“Okay, why don’t you sit right here on this mat and I will talk to you about it in five minutes or so.” (As soon as the student sits down on the mat, Maeve tries to lick his face. He begins to giggle and laugh and fend her off.) I break the role play to comment. “You don’t usually get doggie kisses when you do a VTO. How do you think it would make you feel if you did?”

“Good.”

“Okay, pretend five minutes has gone by. (I make some effort to restrain Maeve’s affection so we can continue our role playing) “Now, how do you feel about that kid who pushed you?”

“Good!”

“Really?!” I say with incredulity, “You feel good about a kid pushing you after five minutes?!” (Maeve gets in for a few more good licks)

“Yeah, that’s the way it works!” (He says as he wipes his doggie slimed cheek on his shoulder)

“Really? You aren’t mad at him at all anymore?”

“Well, it’s in me, but I’m not going to do anything and treat him nice.”

We all know this role play won’t happen quite the way he envisions it here in this fun, uncharged environment. There is a lot of behavioral work which supports the fact that the more opportunities he has to PRACTICE what he should do in a difficult situation, the more likely those practiced skills will be available to him when the difficult situation does arise.

As a sales representative I didn’t take proper care of myself because I was too busy working. Maeve made me slow down and care for her. Through making sure her needs were met, I met my own. Something like this happens with kids in this learning environment. By working with Maeve, they can learn and practice skills that will help them in the end. This is a really young program, but the results I have seen so far make me hopeful that it has the potential to blossom.



Maeve and a boy in the author’s canine assisted skills program are all smiles. While they do have to concentrate on some serious exercises, the session is not all work!

(Photos courtesy Nancy Karp)